

The CEA Forum

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SPECIAL SECTION: REGION(S)

WHAT THEN IS THE AMERICAN, THIS NEW MAN?

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My Early American Survey literature course is organized around an examination of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's question raised in *Letters from an American Farmer*, 1782: "What then is the American, this new man?" The course begins with Native American voices relayed through their creation myths and moves to Christopher Columbus's voicing of his first encounter with the continent, Puritan colonists' voices, voices of patriots, slaves, women, and dreamers, and ends with the fictive voices of Hawthorne, Irving, Melville, and Davis; the course continues to ask Crevecoeur's question of those from all sectors who came here seeking what it means to call oneself "American."

To align the course with our Jesuit college's educational mission, *Education for the common good of the global human community*, I designed a learning environment that combined traditional academic goals with goals relating to civic engagement and social justice, requiring a service learning component. In addition to the expected goals related to content, critical thinking, and communication, two course objectives call for students to enlarge their understanding of what it means to be "American" and to recognize their own citizenship role in relation to the wider community of Americans. Toward that end, four more goals anticipate student achievement related to a service learning project:

- 1) Students will hear and understand voices outside the mainstream of middle class America;
- 2) Students will develop sensitivity to the needs of those who struggle to find their identity;
- 3) Students will understand their service as a contribution to the common good;

4) Students will learn more about themselves in relation to the wider community.

We must start with a working definition of service learning as a widely practiced form of experience-based education rounded out by community service. Richard Katula and Elizabeth Threnhauser define service learning as “a method through which citizenship, academic subjects, skills and values are taught [. . .] [providing] students with experiences to test theories acquired in the classroom and to concretize abstract thought.” Research verifies that service learning must be thoroughly integrated into the academic curriculum and must build upon and reinforce what happens in the classroom (see Applegate and Morreale, Eyler and Giles, Katula and Threnhauser). Martha Nussbaum, in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, makes an eloquent case for the opportunities of teaching civic values in the literature classroom. One salient role for literature is to help develop “the narrative imagination [. . .] the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (10-11). Our study, beginning with the earliest stories of inhabitants of this land and moving through narratives from all sectors of those who came here seeking to discern what it means to call oneself “American,” affords a rich base from which to move into the community as classroom.

Students in the course were required to complete approximately twenty hours of community service outside of class at diverse sites where they engaged with people struggling to find their place and identity in this country. Several tutored in inner-city elementary and middle schools, taught English to children whose parents were enrolled in the college English as a Second Language program, or directed activities at a Boys' and Girls' Club. Another visited weekly with a house-bound Parkinson's disease patient. Three students socialized with a quadriplegic with advanced muscular dystrophy who is their age-mate. Another worked at a home for mentally handicapped children. Students were evaluated on the service by five reflection papers submitted during the course of the semester, counting for 25% of their course grade. The first paper simply described the service situation using the journalist's questions: what, where, when, who, and how, and told what the student expected to learn from the experience. The next three papers were “critical incident” papers spaced throughout the term for which the student was to describe, analyze, and reflect on one specific incident that touched him/her in some way. The final paper came at end of term and reflected on the entire service learning experience, focusing on what the student learned/gained from it. In this essay, the student was also required to relate the service to something in the course readings. Fifteen of the sixteen students enrolled in the course completed the project; the sixteenth was foiled because of conflicts in his own schedule and that of the student he planned to tutor.

I was able to assess the outcome of this venture into service learning in several ways. During the course of the semester, we held frequent short discussions in which students shared their experiences, both positive and negative. Students encouraged and supported each other as well as suggested ways that our process might be refined. The five reflection papers gave the best insight into learning outcomes, and a question on the final exam gave closure to the project.

A major condition for a significant academic experience requires that the students' credit-bearing service activities be thoroughly grounded in course content. Students were instructed to listen to the voices of their contemporaries and consider how economic, social, health, and ethnic factors contributed to their situations, much as they critiqued the voices in American literature of the past. The final reflection papers made fascinating connections to the literature of early America. A number of students found that the teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson resonated through their experiences. One found these words from “The American Scholar” crucial to learning: “The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action.” Emerson reminded her that “Although reading books and learning in the classroom is very beneficial, it is simply not enough. Action is the only way one can fully understand a situation.” The prospect of a bright mind captured in a paralyzed body reminded one student of slave and captivity narratives. Another perceptive young man found that tutoring in a middle school moved him from being a passive observer of the serious problems with public education to an awareness and desire to change the system, much like the progression of involvement in civil disobedience described in Thoreau's “Resistance to Civil Government.” Three students found different connections to Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. One young man saw in Franklin's

teaching about “habitude,” training the mind and body toward moral perfection, an apt description of how his own practice of giving back to the community would likely result in a lifelong habit. Another saw in Franklin's admonition for one to strive for self-improvement an ideal that related to her own growth as well as to the growth of the child she tutored. And yet another student found in Franklin an adverse lesson when his emphasis on industry can lead one to disregard more marginalized groups in society who cannot seem to rise to Franklin's standard.

A second consideration for a positive experience in community-based learning is reciprocity: an agreed upon balance of benefits and responsibilities on both sides. Both Zlatkowski and Jacoby stress the importance of cooperation between the community and the academy in a relationship that recognizes mutual compensations. Students are not only just fulfilling their special “obligations” to the world of the disadvantaged and the impoverished; they also gain some things for themselves while they serve the needs of others. To begin with, most students realized early on they were encountering cultures unfamiliar and strange, whether influenced by debilitating illness, language barriers, poverty, poor school system, mental disability, or parental neglect. These comments note the shock from some: “Everything I was surrounded by at Chastang Middle School was different from what I knew.” “I had never been in an environment such as this.” “Visiting the Mulherin home has added a whole new dimension to my life.” This culture shock usually turned into gratitude for their new awareness, as one student stated: “I could never have predicted, nor hoped for, the knowledge I would gain through the service learning project.”

Some students reflected on how much self-esteem they gained, not from just “helping people” in a kind of instant gratification, but in coming to realize that they had gifts that could in fact make a difference in the wider community. One tentative older student returning to college after several years' absence noted that she had come focusing on her weaknesses and fearing that she could not be effective as a tutor for the little girl assigned to her. Feelings of anxiety she had shelved for many years resurfaced and brought pain. When the end of term came and her little girl said, “Oh man, I don't want a new tutor. I want you to come back,” it was for her a beautiful moment. A young man who visited a house-bound Parkinson's patient came away amazed that this older, respected physician could come to trust and confide in him. He not only learned bravery from his new friend; he learned respect for himself and his own gifts. Personal growth took different trajectories.

Students offered various other gains from their experiences. In some events, service resulted in development of unlikely relationships. One young woman grew from resenting the manipulative power of her handicapped friend to forming an honest relationship in which both parties experienced open and durable friendship. Another found it ironic that she would connect with someone so similar to herself in a school project. Other students noted their past reliance on stereotypes in forming relationships and saw hope in changed acceptance of differences in others. At least two students believed that their hours of tutoring special needs children would help them in their career choices. And one student was stunned to learn from his quadriplegic friend about injustices in the American healthcare system. He said, “Spend twenty minutes talking to Nick about the state of healthcare in American and you'll know exactly what it means to be marginalized in this country.”

Our experience confirmed David D. Cooper's observation, that the reflection process through formal writing is an indispensable component contributing to both academic and personal growth. Without that active closure, my students would not have needed to think through their experience, and I would not have known about their learning outcomes. Several students noted that the reflections helped them to continue to question themselves, to ponder, to process. One stated the point this way: “To reflect in writing about my tutoring experience has offered me many new insights into myself and the program as a whole and has allowed me to do my job more efficiently as a result.”

A question on the final exam asked students to write a paragraph discussing how their service experience in the course contributed to their understanding of what it means to be “American.” Most students expressed new-found gratitude over their own privileged stations and their abilities to choose their life paths. Most also said they gained keener awareness of part of the world quite different from their own. As one stated, “I have become aware that our country is as successful only as its weakest parts. And, more directly, there is a world that

surrounds Spring Hill which is very different from the “projected image” that we see on the wall of our “cave.” Another common expression was appreciation of their own citizenship in a country which encourages not only personal growth but helping others achieve wholeness as well.

Not all the content of the reflection papers issued “feel good” statements, however, and students were not reluctant to state their grievances both in their essays and in our class discussions. Several reported that they had not initially embraced the notion of community service. One wrote, “I groaned when I saw this project in the syllabus. I was certain that I would hate the experience.” Some students also reported that they had difficulty connecting their service to the course content, and this is the issue that I will focus on more when I repeat this course. One could also make the argument that a service learning component in a required course is unfair because students cannot choose to opt out. Most agreed, however, that an instructor could expect participation in projects that promote citizenship just as readily as she can require reading and writing assignments. And by the end of term, most students expressed overcoming initial hesitation or discomfort. There were also logistical problems of matching students with service opportunities. In at least two cases, students were left mid-way without a client to serve and felt a little cheated, even used. One very real difficulty with which we all struggled was the ethical issue of “using” people for a short term “project.” For some, the problem came in having to interpret a friendship as a “reflection on a project.” Most were seriously concerned about developing relationships with needy people for twenty hours during a single semester and then “dropping” them after the project ended. We concluded that students needed to prepare their clients for their leaving, explaining why they could not continue but promising to stay in touch if possible and encouraging them to continue working on the skills they had gained. And we agreed that, while we cannot discount the problem of “dropping” those to whom we have offered a hand, the gains for all participants were greater than the losses could be. Of course there were two or three students who never caught on to the spirit of service and did not follow through on their contract for twenty hours or exhibited little enthusiasm about their work. But the numbers who came to appreciate this learning experience as unique and beneficial far outweighed the malcontents. At least three students commented that they expected to continue to volunteer for service in their communities after they leave college.

Martha Nussbaum eloquently argues for the contribution that service learning makes toward the broad aims of liberal arts education. She says that students must learn to be “citizens of the world,” a position both practically and intrinsically valuable. The liberal arts curriculum should be planned so that students learn about diverse cultures and gain capacities for becoming “sensitive and empathic” interpreters (63). Movement into the wider community with exposure to cultures and situations different from their own provides students with opportunities for such perception, understanding, and reciprocity unavailable when instruction remains within academia. Zlotkowski adds that “higher order thinking and problem-solving skills grow out of direct experience, not simply teaching [. . .] they develop through active involvement and real-life experiences in workplaces and the community.” Leadership training is heightened by a focus on the ethical, moral, and justice-related dimensions of public service.

My syllabus for the Early American Literature course contains a statement from Jesuit Superior General Father Hans Kolvenbach: “Our minds must be challenged to think critically and investigate thoroughly, but our hearts must also be challenged—not simply by concepts, but through the lived experience which awakens the understanding and opens the heart.” We know that much of what is offered by a liberal arts education must incubate in the hearts and minds, flowering later in full-blown active citizenship. I trust that a few hearts as well as minds were opened just a crack after a semester of Early American Literature and service learning, and that the experience will, in the words of Flannery O'Connor's narrator concerning the Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “grow to be a great crow-filled tree in [the student's] heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become” (59).

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